



INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest plays a critical role in the well-being of Wisconsin's environment, economy and communities. Ensuring sustainable forest management is vital to the area's health and vitality on many levels.

This NH-AL master planning effort began with a comprehensive assessment of the ecological, economic, and social conditions. These assessments represent a very detailed review of the NH-AL State Forest its resources, how its used, and its role in the region and state. The master plan aims to extensively involve many publics and partners who are interested and affected by the ecological, economic and social benefits of the forest.

The NH-AL State Forest master plan spells out how the property will be managed, used and developed, how it will look, and the benefits it will provide. It defines the recreational uses, forestry and other land management practices in addition to other aspects of the property's future use and development. The master planning process includes preparing both the plan and an environmental impact statement. Master plans are guided by administrative code NR 44.

The development of the NH-AL Master Plan has been guided by a commitment to sustainable forestry. Forest practices have addressed aspects of sustainability for decades, but "sustainable forestry" is a relatively new concept. While individual definitions may vary slightly, there is general agreement that sustainable forestry focuses on meeting the environmental, economic, recreational and social needs of current

generations while protecting the forest's ability to fill the same role for future generations.

The NH-AL State Forest's progress in achieving sustainable forestry is relatively complex to evaluate given the varying opinions, viewpoints, and values people bring to the issues. An understanding of the current conditions and the desired future conditions will provide the basis on which to make informed decisions into the future.

IMPORTANCE OF THE NH-AL STATE FOREST

The NH-AL is essential to providing and sustaining ecological, economic and social benefits and is particularly important to the local and state economies. Understanding the economic significance of the NH-AL to the surrounding region is vital to comprehending not only the impact of forest management and recreation decisions on community development, but also in understanding the perspectives of those who depend on forest resources for their livelihood.

The physical setting of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest supports a diverse range of forest types and habitats. The majority of the forest is currently young to middle-aged (20–80 years old) with only a few areas containing old-growth characteristics.

The forest supports over thousands of acres in wetlands and lakes—all part of the complex ecosystem that provides habitat to diverse fish, birds, insects and plants, as well as many rare species.

As one of the state's major tourist areas, the NH-AL State Forest supports local communities by providing outdoor recreation for local citizens and tourists. A major attraction is the area's exceptional combination of highly scenic forests, undeveloped lakes and streams, and range of quality outdoor recreational opportunities. Forest-based recreation brings millions of dollars into the local economy every year.

While the increasing interest in outdoor activities and forest recreation is a positive turn of events, it also brings a complex set of new forest management challenges. For example, continuing growth in trails-based activities has heightened tension between user groups—particularly between outdoors enthusiasts who use motorized vehicles and those who do not.

Many visitors also find timber harvesting unsightly and report negative attitudes towards its immediate effects. In some cases, this attitude can make active forest management difficult to undertake. An increased commitment to outreach, community dialogue, and planning will be needed to inform the public about the importance of sustainable forest management practices.

The enduring productivity of the NH-AL forest has long been essential to the stability and growth of the local and state economies. Thirty percent of the north-central Wisconsin's (i.e. 7 counties containing and around the NH-AL) regional economic output and 27% of the region's jobs can be tied to either wood products or tourism. Over the years, we have

learned the important lesson that sustainable management of the forest is integral to the health of the economy.

In addition to its major economic impact, many wildlife species find a seasonal or year-round home in the NH-AL State Forest. The forest is home to many firmly established species. Some of these are popular game species, such as white-tail deer and grouse, which depend on active forest management for suitable habitat. Non-game wildlife species such as herptiles, which include salamanders and frogs, need breeding habitat in ephemeral pools that form on the forest floor. Likewise, songbirds dwell in forested habitats, where their nests can be found in fallen snags or high in the canopy. While some wildlife and plants thrive on disturbed habitats, other species require older undisturbed forests.

The NH-AL supports the highest concentration of lakes in Wisconsin. With over 900 lakes and more than 300 miles of rivers and streams water-based recreation is often one of the primary reasons people visit the NH-AL. Sport fishing, along with swimming, water skiing, canoeing and sightseeing top the list of activities. There are also many remote canoe campsites for those wishing to get away from crowded campgrounds.

Land-based recreation includes activities in both developed and primitive environments. The NH-AL supplies a variety of trail-based recreation from hiking and snowshoe trails to interpretive nature trails and mountain bike trails. The forest also offers a range of camping opportunities. Campers seeking



the full outdoor experience have the opportunity to camp along designated backpacking trails with no developed facilities. Campers can also choose modern and rustic campgrounds where developed facilities are available.

Each year, an increase in forest visitors places higher demands on the recreational facilities. In addition, water- and forest-based recreation is expected to increase in the NH-AL region.

PURPOSE OF THE MASTER PLAN

To plan for the future use and management of the forest, the Department of Natural Resources worked actively with federal, state, and local governments (particularly towns), tribes, non-governmental organization, citizens, and businesses over several years to revise the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Master Plan. The planning process is guided by State Statute 28.04 and Wisconsin Administrative code NR44.

The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Master Plan:

- Provides a vision and framework for the use, development, management and acquisition of the forest well into the future with an emphasis on the next 15 years.
- Identifies and plans areas for future management and use. Use designations include: forest production, habitat, native community, wilderness, scenic, special, and recreation.



- Describes general land management and specific management objectives and prescriptions for each management area.
- Makes recommendations for recreation, forest production, and habitat conservation to serve future needs.
- Provides for continuing public involvement during plan implementation.

ABOUT THIS DRAFT PLAN

From its inception, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest master plan has been driven by a strong commitment to public participation and sustainable forestry. Sustainability, a concept that is not new to forestry, is generally defined as meeting the needs of current generations while protecting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Based on sustainability, a common vision and goals have guided the planning process.

This is your plan. The NH-AL State Forest master plan addresses people's desires for the future. Wisconsinites want their forest resources sustained for future generations. At the same time, they expect a full range of environmental, social, and ecological benefits today and in the future. This plan attempts to achieve that balance in a scientifically credible and sustainable way. It was developed with countless hours of public input and several rigorous scientific and technical reviews. Many hands were involved in shaping it.

This is a visionary plan. The NH-AL State Forest master plan captures an idealized view of the state forest's long-term future. This points general direction for short-term actions. The diversity of the forest structure is enhanced over time, providing for a broad range of social and ecological values important to Wisconsin citizens, including recreation. Diverse forest communities contribute to the range of fish and wildlife habitats necessary for all native species, and contribute to broad biodiversity.

This is a focused plan. The plan calls for active and passive management across the landscape and over time to achieve its goals and objectives. It relies on integrated and adaptive management of the forest resources and focuses on the compatibility of forest uses over time.

This is a flexible and adaptive plan. The plan calls for adaptive management and monitoring the response of the forest to strategies outlined in the plan. The responses are evaluated against the objectives. The plan calls for continuous monitoring and regular public reviews and a major review every 15 years.

This is a sustainable plan. A sustainable forest requires flexibility and adaptability. This plan will assure sustainable forest products, continued recreation opportunities as well as a sustainable ecosystem and healthy watersheds.



This plan updates the previous NH-AL master plans, the latest of which was published in 1984. While earlier master plans were scheduled to be revised every ten years, this plan and future forest plans will be continuously revised and updated with a formal, rigorous review every 15 years. This process will allow for greater public comment and input, and permit the Department to better anticipate and respond to changing issues, technologies, and forest conditions.

OVERVIEW OF PLANNING PROCESS

The process for updating the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Master Plan began in 1997. Collectively, past management plans and extensive ecological, economic, and social assessments and public input provided the foundation for future management of the NH-AL.

Public involvement has been an integral part of the planning process, beginning with public open house meetings and surveys to identify important planning issues and views on the forest's future direction. They that involvement continued through the other steps in the process, writing a draft vision and goals for the forest, developing and evaluating management alternatives, and in forming the preferred alternative (i.e. draft concept plan). This planning process culminates with the public review of the draft master plan and EIS followed by plan review and approval by the Natural Resources Board.



PURPOSE OF STATE FORESTS

State forests are defined by Wisconsin Statutes 28. The purposes and benefits of state forests are outlined in the following language of 28.04 (2):

- (a) The department shall manage the state forests to benefit the present and future generations of residents of this state, recognizing that the state forests contribute to local and statewide economies and to a healthy natural environment. The department shall assure the practice of sustainable forestry and use it to assure that state forests can provide a full range of benefits for present and future generations. The department shall also assure that the management of state forests is consistent with the ecological capability of the state forest land and with the long-term maintenance of sustainable forest communities and ecosystems. These benefits include soil protection, public hunting, protection of water quality, production of recurring forest products, outdoor recreation, native biological diversity, aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, and aesthetics. The range of benefits provided by the department in each state forest shall reflect its unique character and position in the regional landscape.
- (b) In managing the state forests, the department shall recognize that not all benefits under par. (a) can or should be provided in every area of a state forest.
- (c) In managing the state forests, the department shall recognize that management may consist of both active and passive techniques.



HOW THE STATUTORY AND OTHER PURPOSES AND BENEFITS OF THE STATE FOREST WILL BE REALIZED THROUGH THE DRAFT PLAN:

Local and Statewide Economies

Under the plan the forest would increase its contribution to the state and local forest products industry and tourism. Annual harvest levels could rise to nearly double the current levels. The maintenance a wide range of diverse recreational opportunities and settings, expansion of camping and trail facilities, maintenance of the forest scenic resources and wild life and fisheries will continue the forest's role as one of the state's leading recreation destination areas.

A Healthy Natural Environment and the Long-term Maintenance of Sustainable Forest Communities and Ecosystems

Due to the NH-AL size and varied resources all of the prescribed benefits of a state forest may be realized on the property. By managing for these benefits, as prescribed in the draft plan, the goals of achieving a healthy natural environment and the long-term maintenance of sustainable forest communities and ecosystems would be realized.

Full Range of Benefits

Protection of soils and water quality: Soils and water quality will continue to be protected by maintaining 97 percent or more of the land in an undisturbed condition and by following erosion control practices, such as the Best Forest Management Practices for Water Quality, when conducting forest and other management activities. Maintaining the forest's undeveloped shorelands is another important way to safeguard the forest's high water quality. Expansion of the forest boundary will provide opportunities to expand protection to new areas and waters.

Production of recurring forest products: Under the proposed plan 93 percent (154,000 acres) of the potentially productive lands, will be under active, sustainable management producing forest products.

Outdoor recreation: The plan proposes to maintain all existing recreational opportunities and expand most.

Family camping capacity would increase by 27 percent, raising the total number of family campsites to 1,106. Group camping capacity would double. Canoe and other remote campsites would increase by 20 sites.

The 400+ miles of snowmobile trails would be maintained, and an 8-12 mile loop ATV trail would be added. Other additions to forest trails include a new mountain bike trail, a family paved bike trail, and hiking/backpacking trails.

The abundant access to state forest lakes would be maintained, as well as opportunities for boating, canoeing, or fishing on wilderness, wild, and other non-motor lakes.

Hunting and fishing opportunities will remain abundant.

The development of a Forestry Awareness, Education, and Visitor Center would greatly expand the recreational and educational opportunities for visitors and local school students.

Native biological diversity: Native biological diversity would be enhanced through the gradual increased presence of old-growth forest communities and habitat, primarily of the oak and red/white pine type. This native community type is rare in the state, and so are good opportunities for restoration. Approximately 13 percent of the forest's upland acreage would be under old-growth forest management. Endangered and threatened species will continue to be protected, primarily this would be accomplished through a high level of protection of the abundant wetland and shoreline habitats. About 75% of the NH-AL's rare plants and animals are dependent upon in wetlands.

Aquatic and terrestrial wildlife: All wetlands and lakes would receive a high level of protection. Nearly all wetlands would be passively managed. Best Forest Management Practices for Water Quality (BMPs) will be followed and the undeveloped shorelines would remain undeveloped.



Aesthetics: Over time the general scenic quality of the forest would be further enhanced as large pines and oaks become more common through the practice of Big Tree Silviculture and old-growth forest management. The scenic quality of all shorelines and primary roadways will be maintained and enhanced through the application of aesthetic management techniques.

PLAN CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

The State Forest Master Plan is organized into six chapters. Chapter Two is the PLAN chapter. Here you will find the proposed vision, goals, objectives, management prescriptions and development prescriptions, other management plans and policies as well as a plan for ongoing public involvement. The remaining chapters provide an analysis of impacts of the draft plan, an overview of alternatives considered and their impacts, background information (including a description of the NH-AL's regional setting), and finally a review of the public involvement.

